

December

2

JOHN'S BIRTH FORETOLD

God miraculously sets into motion the fulfillment of Israel's hope.

THE WORD

LUKE
1:5-25

In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. ⁶Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. ⁷But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

⁸Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, ⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

¹¹Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. ¹³But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. ¹⁴He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. ¹⁶He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. **¹⁷And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.**"

¹⁸Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

KEY VERSE

¹⁹The angel said to him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. ²⁰And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.”

²¹Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. ²²When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

²³When his time of service was completed, he returned home. ²⁴After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. ²⁵“The Lord has done this for me,” she said. “In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.”

ENGAGE THE WORD

Luke's Preface 1:1-4

As we journey through the early stages of Jesus' life, Luke gives careful attention to historical detail. He locates his gospel in place, time, and with reference to key persons. Take time to notice the ways in which God was at work in the people's lives. Think about how God is active now as we obey God's promptings.

Luke 1:5-10

Luke's gospel begins in “the time of Herod.” Herod the Great ruled from 37 to 4 BC. We only think of him as “great” because of his political power and significant buildings in Israel associated with him. Herod was an evil man and was responsible for the “slaughter of the innocents” after the Magi's visit to Jerusalem looking for the “King of the Jews” (Matthew 2:1-23).

Luke begins with a birth announcement to Zechariah, “a priest” of the “division of Abijah” (Nehemiah 12:4, 17; 1 Chronicles 24:10). Zechariah and his wife “were both very old” and “childless.” But Luke reports a miraculous conception. Their child, John the Baptist, would herald the ministry of Jesus.

A RIGHTEOUS COUPLE—EMPTY ARMS

Think About It

Zechariah and Elizabeth are described as godly and devout (Luke 1:5-6). Their story begins with them being old and unable to have a child. Yet, God will do what seemed impossible—bless them with a son. From their lives we can see that God is the God of the possible!

GOD'S MESSENGER—GOD'S PLAN

SILENCED BY DOUBT—YET IN SILENCE GOD SPEAKS

Zechariah and Elizabeth were “righteous in the sight of God.” The word “righteous” and related words “right,” “righteousness,” and “just” appear more than 300 times in the Bible. However, only three other persons in Luke’s writings are called “righteous.” Simeon, who spoke words of celebration over the infant Jesus (Luke 2:25). A prominent Gentile, Cornelius, a Roman, is a righteous man (Acts 10:22). Most significantly, Jesus, while dying on the cross, is declared “righteous” (Luke 23:47).

Luke 1:11-17

To this praying family God sent a heavenly messenger. The encounter brought “fear,” though the angel quickly provided reassurance—“Do not be afraid.” Prayer, a frequent theme in Luke, figures importantly in the story. The prayers of Zechariah and his wife will be answered. The angel promises the aged couple will have “a son” to be named “John.” He will bring “joy and delight” to “many” and “be great in the sight of the Lord,” experiencing the fullness of the Holy Spirit while still in his mother’s womb.

A family waiting, hoping, and praying for a child, parallels the yearning of a nation/people waiting, hoping, and praying for a deliverer, the Messiah. While John was not the Messiah, he had a crucial role to call people back to God. He would prepare the way for God’s Messiah “in the spirit and power of Elijah” (v.17; see Malachi 4:5-6). This Elijah connection appears also in Matthew 17:9-13 and Mark 9:9-13. John’s ministry draws on Isaiah 40:3 (see Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4; and John 1:23).

Luke 1:18-25

Zechariah questioned God’s messenger, reminding the angel of the couples advanced years. The angel, Gabriel, sought to communicate “good news” clearly to Zechariah. But because Zechariah did not receive Gabriel’s words with clear faith, Zechariah became

Did You Know?

Several places in the Bible the inability to conceive, or also success at becoming pregnant, was understood as something that was God's doing. Individuals whose stories are similar to that of Elizabeth include Sarah (Genesis 16:2), Rebekah (Genesis 25:21), Rachel (Genesis 30:23), and Hannah (1 Samuel 1:1-18).

mute until the birth of the promised child. How quickly doubt can creep in, even when the message comes from God. Zechariah's doubt led to his silence; yet in the silence God was still speaking. The event would be at an "appointed time"—a time with significance.

The temple vision delayed Zechariah's return to the worshipers outside. God's angel had spoken important words to Zechariah, but he was, ironically, now unable to speak. Zechariah served his rotation (there were many priestly descendants who qualified for a "time of service") and "returned home."

Soon, it seems, "Elizabeth became pregnant." The long delay came quickly as God worked in the lives of this godly couple. Elizabeth took a quiet approach to her pregnancy, opting for "seclusion." God had shown "favor" to her. She reflected a rather typical Hebraic view that children are a "heritage" from God (Psalm 127:3). What had been a matter of "disgrace" she now considered evidence of God's grace. God often surprises us, always doing more beneath the surface than we can see on top.

REFLECT | In what ways can you open yourself up—through faithfulness—for God's use today?

RICK L. WILLIAMSON is retired professor of Biblical Literature at Mount Vernon Nazarene University, Mount Vernon, OH. He is the author of the *New Beacon Bible Commentary* on 1, 2, & 3 John.